

*To Whom Shall We Go?*  
Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian Century  
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*Simon Peter answered him, Lord to whom shall we go? Thou hast words of eternal life.”*  
— John 6:67.

Jesus had been popular. The multitude had followed him to hear his words, to catch the charm of his personality and to be cured of physical ills. But gradually, as Jesus unfolded the full meaning of his way of life, the multitude found his ideals as difficult as they were engaging and began to desert him, muttering, “These are hard sayings, who can hear them?” Only the smaller circle of disciples remained and Jesus was not quite sure of them. At least, he determined to test them. Did they also desire to leave him? No, Peter answered, as usual the spokesman for the rest, *Where shall we go?*

**Comfort and challenge.** Christ’s gospel presents both a way of looking at life and reality, and a way of living. What Jesus offered his disciples was fellowship with a God of love and a way of living in and by love. He believed that the universe itself must be interpreted in terms of a personality which expresses itself in love, and he believed in the practical and redemptive efficacy of love in all human relationships. His ethic and his religion were one; and he was clear-eyed enough to know that any consistent obedience to a God of love would inevitably result in suffering. He saw that the world was not altogether under the dominion of God. The world has its own standards, which at best are standards of decency with love left out; and being jealous of those standards it will crucify anyone who will condemn them by surpassing them. Love cannot be redemptive until it identifies itself with its object, in which case it suffers for the sins and becomes the victim of the weaknesses of the beloved. The strategy of love therefore makes almost impossible demands upon the soul, but the difficult adventure is made easy by the fact that whoever embarks upon it progressively discovers the love which is at the very heart of things.

**Alternatives.** What are the alternatives of such a challenge combined with such an assurance? Arthur Hugh Clough gives classic expression to this position in his “Easter Day”:

*Eat, drink, and play, and think that this is bliss,  
There is no heaven but this;  
There is no hell,  
Save earth, which serves that purpose doubly well,  
Seeing it visits still  
With equalest apportionment of ill  
Both good and bad alike, and brings to one same dust  
The just and the unjust  
With Christ who is not risen.*

**Is love effective?** Moral nihilism is too strong for the stomach of most men. A more popular position is therefore to affirm the love and goodness at the heart of things but to doubt the efficacy of love and the practicality of goodness in immediate situations.

**Alternative.** There is an alternative to the position of Christ's so closely related to it at some points that it is often mistaken for it. It is the position of the pantheist who sees the whole universe in terms of God and regards all partial evil as universal good. He views the immoral caprices of nature which outrage the heart of a stoic through a mist of mysticism until he persuades himself that evil is some kind of illusion. The pantheist is tempted to become either a consistent pessimist or a consistent optimist, and in either case he enervates the springs of moral action. Even if his pessimism rises to the sublime spiritual heights of a Buddha, he denies life and beats a splendid retreat. As for the optimist who regards evil as an illusion, he is infinitely inferior to the heroic moralist who makes a brave though, as he thinks, futile stand against the atrocities of nature. The pantheist either takes the cross out of Christianity or sees nothing but the cross — without the resurrection.

**The promise of Jesus.** The promise of Jesus against all these various counsels is that the love at the heart of the universe; the love of a Father, will be progressively revealed to anyone who will venture his life upon the assumption that the universe is really grounded in love and who will maintain an attitude of humble and reverent expectancy for what God may reveal in his experience.

He does not promise any easy or magical revelation of God to every chance searcher. The assurance that the universe itself is moral and will respond with helpful resources to the spiritual aspiring soul must come progressively to the moral adventurer. It is the pure in heart who shall see God. Out of their moral experiences they shall fashion the means of perception by which God becomes real. Yet even when they reach that assurance they will not be saved from suffering from the world's confusion. To cooperate with God means, in fact, to accept the cross.

The cross is a symbol of the fact that order has no easy victory in the world over chaos, that love has no easy triumph over force. Christ is always assuring one half of the world that the victory of the spirit over the confusion of the world is not impossible, and the other half that victory is not easy. He himself touched areas of life from which God seemed absent and had experiences in which for a moment the love of God appeared to be an illusion. The cry "*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" came out of a tortured soul — tortured not so much by physical pain as by the terrible reality of a life mission in apparent ruins. Yet a moment afterward came the cry of victory, "*My God, into thy hands I commend my spirit!*"

The experience of Jesus upon the cross is not one of a dreamy pantheist who imagines God in easy and magical control of every process in the universe. It was the experience of a spiritual adventurer who saw life as a struggle between love and chaos but who also discovered the love at the center of things which guarantees the victory in every apparent defeat. Is there any philosophy which accounts for all the facts of life so well? And is there any faith which so completely satisfies all human needs? Where shall we go to receive so much strength for the struggle and so much comfort in its momentary defeats and so much assurance of the ultimate triumph?